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# Hip-hop and Poetry: Listen to the Words

Jordan Dingle

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**Cultural Studies Program**  
**Departments of English and Creative Writing and**  
**Humanities, History, and Social Sciences**  
**Columbia College Chicago**  
**Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

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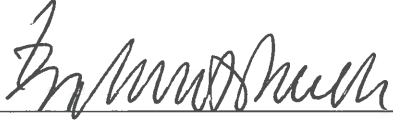
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Cultural Studies Program

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# **Hip-hop and Poetry: Listen To The Words**

**By**

**Jordan Dingle**

**Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

**Cultural Studies Program  
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Columbia College Chicago**

**May 11<sup>th</sup> 2018**

**Abstract:**

Hip-hop is a subculture that has become a major part of popular culture and heavily affects contemporary music, clothing, and media. The subculture initially started as a way for the historically oppressed to voice themselves and have a dialogue for social dilemmas that were relevant to them. Maintaining this voice of authenticity will become more difficult the larger and more commercialized Hip-hop becomes, thus it is important to identify mediums that are being used to express authenticity through discussion of social dilemmas in Hip-hop culture. This project identifies poetry as a medium that is used to display authenticity in Hip-hop culture by allowing the marginalized a voice to discuss problems they face within the subculture.

**Keywords:** Hip-hop, Poetry, Economic Inequality, Race, Feminism, Homophobia

“This is the first anthology of poems by and for the hip-hop generation. And it’s about time.” – Kevin Coval

The purpose of the essay is to display and discuss how poetry is used as a medium for marginalized voices within hip-hop culture to discuss social dilemmas through a literary analysis of the book *BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in The Age of Hip-Hop*.

Hip-hop has grown substantially as a subculture to the point where it has become a major part of popular culture and is heavily commodified. The commodification of the culture can be observed in the use of hip-hop and rap music to sell products geared towards a white audience. In 1992, for example, Mattel released a commercial for Barbie that featured the doll wearing a leather jacket, gold chain and a hoodie, as well as coming with a battery-operated toy boom-box. The commercial additionally feature young girls rapping about the barbie doll. The commodification of hip-hop in this manner takes some of the surface attributes of hip-hop; rapping and fashion, and packages it for consumption, leaving behind the culture and intent of hip-hop.

Poetry is an integral and founding part of Hip-hop as a subculture but is often a largely ignored section of Hip-hop by popular culture. I will ask the question: how does contemporary poetry take part in the dialogue of social issues in Hip-hop culture, such as racism, gender discrimination, and socio-economic hardship?

First, I define what current Hip-hop culture consists of. Then, I identify what the various social dilemmas surrounding identity and representation are within the Hip-hop subculture. I use literary analysis of poems from the anthology, *The Breakbeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop* to gain an understanding of the role that poetry plays in Hip-hop culture and how social dilemmas are addressed using the medium of poetry. This lead me to an understanding of the relationship of contemporary poetry to the culture of Hip-hop and of how poetry is used as a medium to display the subculture. I learned that poetry is used as a tool to discuss issues within Hip-hop without the pressure of commercial success.

Poetry has a deep connection with rap music and Hip-hop culture that stems from many rappers practicing poetry and slam poetry in the early days of the culture. It was, and continues to be, a way for people within Hip-hop culture to partake in dialogues regarding social dilemmas such as race, economics, gender issues, and violence.

Using literary and historical analysis poetry related Hip-hop culture, this project aims to show how poetry contributes to the dialogue on social dilemmas within Hip-hop culture. The historic and artistic connections between poetry and Hip-hop culture affirm the importance of poetry as a tool for discussion of critical issues in Hip-hop culture. Poetry allows Hip-hop to grow commercially while still keeping an aspect of its' authenticity to the political and social justice roots that helped it become the phenomenon it is today. It is important to view Hip-hop as more than a subculture because of the global impact it has had on society.

“Hip-hop is not a homogeneous entity. It should be understood as an umbrella term containing at least four distinct parts: break-dancing, DJ-ing, graffiti art, and rapping. It is important to foreground the multiple components of hip-hop culture since it is often reduced to rapping and rap music, which immediately limits the discussion of it and also excludes potential and actual sites of resistance within hip-hop occurring outside of rap. (Whitney 23)

Hip-hop formed in the early 1970s in New York City as an underground subculture and movement focused initially on emceeing over “breakbeats.” New York City provided the perfect environment for the development of Hip-hop because of the historically marginalized Black and Latino communities searching for a unique form of expression and protest. The earliest pioneers of the culture were disc jockeys such as DJ “Cool Herc” who began isolating percussion breaks in disco songs and extending them indefinitely using two records and a mixer. Spoken word poetry, either rehearsed or improvised, was performed over these breaks. This developed into another key musical element of Hip-hop, the art of emceeing or rapping, the delivery of spoken word or creative wordplay over a break or beat provided by a DJ.

In the year 1982, a pivotal moment in hip-hop history was reached as one of the first songs of the genre reached achieved widespread commercial success and exposed the rest of America to the art form for the first time. The song was *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. It was the first popular hip-hop song to provide social commentary and protest the impoverishment and poor living



conditions of the Bronx. This a massive departure from the usual party songs that hip-hop largely consisted of at the time. The lyrics of the song very bluntly paint a picture of the life and struggle of those living in an oppressed and impoverished environment as well as the affects that has on a person. The song, with its wide spread acclaim signified a critical shift in hip-hop culture that put emcees and lyricism at the forefront of the culture. Emcees had the opportunity to incorporate rhythmic poetry into hip-hop as a way to show lyrical skills and convey messages to the audience.

The late 1980s and 1990s brought more exposure of hip-hop and music to mainstream America and a further commercialization of the culture. One of the major culminations of this commercialization and popularization of hip-hop is displayed in the song *California Love* by Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre. The song reached mass commercial and critical acclaim, reaching number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and going double Platinum in the United States in 1996. While the sales and reach of the song are impressive for hip-hop at the time, Tupac himself was indicative of a wider acceptance and popularity of gangster rap in mainstream culture. The rapper was able to create songs that appealed to popular music due to its' party appeal as well as make songs that talk about the struggles of an oppressed people.

Women began making large strides in Hip-hop in both visibility and commercial success. In 1998, Lauryn Hill released her debut solo single titled *Doo Wop (That Thing)*. Hill is an example of very poetic hip-hop developing and expanding its' topics to be more inclusive. While the misogyny within Hip-hop still remains, Lauryn Hill set a precedent for women in hip-hop to strive for. She is part of trend of female rappers that push the boundaries and open the doors for female representation within Hip-hop.

It is highly important to note that the songs mentioned are song a few of many examples of major points of hip-hop music that chart the development and change of political and social discourse in hip-hop culture throughout its' existence.

While the literal definition of a social dilemma can be described as a social issue that is a difficult situation or problem, I will use the term in a more specific manner. In the context of this project, a social dilemma is an issue, attribute or bias that is implemented by or affects are large group of people. In this case, we are focusing on dilemmas that affect a particular subculture. The subculture, being Hip-hop culture.

### **Dilemma #1: Socio-Economic Inequality, "The Ghetto"**

Hip-hop is subculture that was formed largely as the result of long term economic strife and inequality for minority populations in the United States. African-Americans in particular suffered, and still do, in urban centers of country such as New York, Chicago, Atlanta and Los Angeles. These cities became centers of hip-hop culture over time. Hip-hop music has become a way for historically oppressed communities to express the struggles of economic hardship in an detailed and direct way. A famous early example of this is Grandmaster Flash's *The Message*, in which he explains the hardships of living in New York in the 1970s. In the song, Grandmaster Flash describes what life is like living in an impoverished south Bronx neighborhood. He describes living in a filthy home with no money to move out, desperate drug addicts, and mentally ill people living on the street.

"Broken glass everywhere  
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care  
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise

Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat  
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far  
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car  
  
Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to lose my head  
It's like a jungle sometimes  
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under  
  
Standin' on the front stoop hangin' out the window  
Watchin' all the cars go by, roarin' as the breezes blow  
Crazy lady, livin' in a bag  
Eatin' outta garbage pails, used to be a fag hag  
Said she'll dance the tango, skip the light fandango  
A Zircon princess seemed to lost her senses  
Down at the peep show watchin' all the creeps  
So she can tell her stories to the girls back home  
She went to the city and got so so seditty  
She had to get a pimp, she couldn't make it on her own  
  
Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to lose my head  
It's like a jungle sometimes  
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under"

As the title of the song describes, *The Message* is intended to both inform listeners who don't understand the issues that impoverished and oppressed communities face, as well as serve as an example of how those within impoverished and oppressed communities can communicate their struggles and protest their conditions.

An impoverished community faces issues that often get ignored by mainstream culture. The communities in which hip-hop was born faced high crime rates, drug addiction, and subpar education. By the very nature of being impoverished, it was, and is much more difficult for there to be a wide spread dialogue of issues to promote

change and protest the oppression being brought upon poverty-stricken areas. Hip-hop music was used to give people a voice and tool to both communicate with other oppressed peoples and protest the conditions that they live. The impact of hip-hop on popular culture has made people more aware of mass poverty and economic inequality in the United States. Although the impact of awareness is positive, hip-hop's increased commercialization inevitably eclipses the issues that hip-hop was created to express. Hip-hop has been absorbed by popular music and is no longer exclusive to oppressed, minority communities. As a result, it is difficult for people to express the issues of economic inequality in the space of hip-hop through music alone. Poetry, because it is, by nature, difficult to commercialize and sanitize, allows a way for oppressed peoples to express, protest and inform on economic inequality in an authentic way. Early aspects of hip-hop culture, music, breaking and graffiti, were not considered profitable by any means and served as an artistic medium rather than a commercial one. Poetry is an artistic format that remains untampered with. It is an even playing field for people who do not live on one.

### **Dilemma #2: Race, Hip-hop as a space for minority peoples**

Race is a major issue within Hip-hop culture and music. This is because Hip-hop was created by a group of people who are oppressed. The history of racism in the United States dating back to the Atlantic slave trade has created the current state of race relations in the United States. African Americans use hip-hop to discuss issues surrounding race such as economic discrimination and police brutality. The racial discrimination towards blacks is directly tied to economic inequality within black communities. African-Americans have been persecuted, restricted with Jim Crow laws

and victims of violence throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hip-hop culture in its very nature is a protest to these conditions.

Police brutality is a very visible manifestation of racism towards minorities in the United States and has served as topic of discussion in Hip-hop since its inception. The late 80s rap group N.W.A. created *Fuck tha Police*, a protest song that shocked listeners with language that was consider vulgar at the time, and discussion of police targeting young black men; a fact that was either unknown or not accepted by the mainstream, white culture of America. In the first verse, the rapper Ice Cube voices his disdain for police and questions why they have the authority to harass and emasculate him simply because of the way he looks.

“Fuck the police coming straight from the underground  
A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown  
And not the other color so police think  
they have the authority to kill a minority  
Fuck that shit, 'cause I ain't the one  
for a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun  
to be beating on, and thrown in jail  
We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell  
Fucking with me 'cause I'm a teenager  
with a little bit of gold and a pager  
Searching my car, looking for the product  
Thinking every nigga is selling narcotics  
You'd rather see, me in the pen  
than me and Lorenzo rolling in a Benz-o”

The sentiment that Ice Cube presents in *Fuck tha Police* is one that reflects the history of oppression by authorities towards black people in the United States. Hip-hop is the only space where an oppressed black person in the United States is able to voice their experience with hate and with racism in an open setting, without restriction. This is

because hip-hop was created by oppressed people for oppressed people. This does not mean that hip-hop is exclusive to those who face oppression, but they were the intended audience. Hip-hop's commercialization has changed this greatly. Its absorption into popular culture has increased its cultural visibility but limited the space for expression by oppressed peoples to the few who are wildly successful commercially and are able to discuss dilemmas unabashedly. Poetry has been a space to discuss hate and racism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It melds perfectly with rap music since the two are linked intrinsically. Poets can discuss race issues truthfully without fear of repercussion or censorship since there is a limited commercial aspect involved with the medium. Poets do not sell their poems in the same manner that hip-hop music artists do.

### **Dilemma #3: Misogyny in Hip-hop music**

Hip-hop as a subculture has become more blatantly misogynistic as it has grown more commercialized. While it is important to understand that Hip-hop is a heterogeneous entity, the music side of the culture, which is the most visible and commercial aspect, has created a space in which women in the industry are portrayed largely through stereotypical gender tropes and sexist lyrics.

The need for feminism within hip-hop culture is apparent from its' inception. Whitney Peoples, in her essay *Under Construction*, defined feminism as "...the political movement and the mode of analysis aimed at addressing the social, political, and economic inequities that plague the lives of women and girls worldwide." (Peoples, 33) She further described the goals of the movement:

In the American context, feminism began with the task of proving women's equality to men as a means to lobby for women's right to education, fulfilling work, and political participation. Yet the movement grew into more radical and substantial critiques of patriarchal power and privilege with the arrival of feminism's second wave during the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s. American feminism of the second wave was marked by its use of mass-movement organizing via marches, protests, and the establishment of national and local organizations aimed at lobbying for and serving the needs of women. ( 33)

Hip-hop at its birth, was all about the need for an oppressed people to voice themselves and gain the ability to protest in society that would not allow them to do so openly. The United States has always been a patriarchal society based on European values of gender. Although the U.S. is labeled as the country of freedom, more than half of the white population of the country wasn't allowed to vote in its elections until 1920. Women have consistently been second class citizens to men. Knowing the condition of women in the United States and the history of oppression that women have faced, Hip-hop, to an extent, is a welcoming space. Unfortunately, Hip-hop has and does, suffer from the same dilemmas of misogyny that the rest of Western culture does. A major source of hypocrisy from Hip-hop is its' ability to provide a voice to oppressed people while still oppressing women. Hip-hop, especially music from the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, saw further popularization of objectifying and hypersexualizing women within the culture. It is important to note, that there were and are, successful women in hip-hop who are able to subvert these trends. Yet, misogynistic aspects of hip-hop culture still remain.

A very visible example of this is a song by Lil Wayne titled *Pussy Monster*. The song describes the rappers lust and desire for women, which in this context is almost completely described as just “Pussy.”

“It goes P-U-S-S-Y because,  
It's the reason I am alive  
Mama I need just to survive  
It's like I got to eat to stay alive

Hi I'm the pussy monster  
The pussy monster  
The pussy monster  
And you better feed me pussy pussy pussy pussy pussy”

The song is quite problematic on many levels. The reduction of women down to the word “pussy” is a strong manifestation of objectification. This part of hip-hop culture is one that has been magnified by its’ commercialization. Popular culture has identified that sex sells. As hip-hop further fused with popular culture the misogynistic side of the culture magnified because of the desire to capitalize on the culture and as a result of hip-hop being a historically male dominated culture in terms of voice. Peoples describes feminism’s place in Hip-hop culture as a reclamation:

The birth of hip-hop feminism might be best understood as a means of reconciliation and reclamation on the part of young black women in the U.S. trying to create a space for themselves between the whiteness and/or academically sanitized versions of university-based feminism, where most first encountered a conscious naming and exploration of feminism, and the maleness of the hip-hop culture that most grew up on. (26)



Feminism is able to navigate and claim a space within hip-hop culture and it is incredibly important that it does. Contemporary Hip-hop, although a very different space from the one it was in its' inception, serves an important tool for change that when combined with poetry creates an authentic discussion of dilemmas to produce change. Peoples further discusses the importance of Hip-hop and feminism working together in the culture.

"Hip-hop's popularity and intelligibility across a number of spheres imbues it with undeniable potential for those hoping to reach young people and particularly black youth. Additionally, the diversity of hip-hop culture and rap music provides sites of political disruption and subversion that also work to reinforce messages of resistance. For in this way, hip-hop emerges as what I term "the generational and culturally relevant vehicle" through which hip-hop feminists can spread their message of critical analysis and empowerment." (Peoples, 25)

#### **Dilemma #4: Homophobia**

Queer people have traditionally been excluded from Hip-hop culture due to gender norms and the expectation of hyper-masculinity. In his piece titled "'We Don't Wear Tight Clothes': Gay Panic and Queer Style in Contemporary Hip Hop," Joel Penney describes the phenomenon of "gay panic", which is the perceived threat to masculinity in hip-hop by trends of form fitting clothes traditionally associated with queer style, within hip-hop culture and the spectral response of violence as a way to enforce the "hard" masculine image. Penney describes how severe homophobia within hip-hop manifested itself with a trend of figures who see themselves as "true" masculine figures publicly rebuking those who went against the traditional "gangsta-rap" image in favor of

high fashion clothes often made by designers who were queer. Penney brings up the example of Kanye West's embrace of queer style and the criticism from the hyper-masculine rapper 50 Cent as being representative of "two competing images in contemporary black male hip-hop artist, not only in terms of what he should look and sound like, but also in his attitudes toward the broader social world, including the LGBT community" (Penney 324).

The fact that there are two competing images of masculinity in hip-hop displays the problem in itself; that the trend of homophobia in hip-hop has been so strong that any semblance of queer style is considered a threat to hip-hop by enough people within the culture to the point there a split occurred. The association of queerness with femininity is at the core of the queerphobic mindset. Penney also discusses the fear and rejection of sexualization of the male body within hip-hop. The introduction of form fitting clothes in hip-hop broke the established gender codes of fashion in hip-hop. Penney describes this. "The gender-specific codes established within mainstream hip-hop fashion follow a distinct pattern: the male body is cloaked in fabric, often from head to toe, while the black female body is revealed with tight fitting outfits and positioned as an object of sexual desire." (Penney 325) The popular sub-genre of gangsta rap standardized baggy, loose clothes as the uniform for the hyper-masculine hip-hop artist and those who consume the culture.

In recent years, there have been more openly queer hip-hop musicians contributing to the culture. While some of these artists are still considered "underground," some are gaining more mainstream recognition and acceptance as the LGBTQ community gains acceptance around the country. One such rapper is Kevin

Abstract, who released a song titled *JUNKY* that detailed his experience as a youth dealing with drug addiction and navigating his community as a gay man. Abstract is quite open and honest about his sexuality.

I told my mom I was gay, why the fuck she ain't listen?  
I signed a pub deal and her opinion fuckin' disappearin'  
I'm payin' bills for my sister and tryna fund her business  
Is it homophobic to only hook up with straight niggas?  
You know, like closet niggas, masc-type  
Why don't you take that mask off? That's the thought I had last night  
Why you always rap about bein' gay?  
'Cause not enough niggas rappin' be gay

Where I come from niggas get called "faggot" and killed  
So I'ma get head from a nigga right here  
And they can come and cut my hand off and  
And my legs off and  
And I'ma still be a boss 'til my head go, yeah

While there are more openly queer people within hip-hop culture, those who identify with non-conforming genders or sexual binaries are not included in the mainstream gaze of the culture. Poetry offers a unique way to display and tell the stories and discuss the experiences of queer identifying people in Hip-hop. The lack of commercial control on the medium allows anyone to partake.

## **Analysis**

The four dilemmas within hip-hop, economic inequality, race, homophobia and misogyny, are just a few of many issues and conversations that are happening within the culture continually. The issues of economic inequality, racism(?), misogyny and homophobia are some of the most prominent. The conversation of these topics can be easily viewed in contemporary poetry. The anthology book *Breakbeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-hop*, the topics listed above are creatively discussed

in the context of hip-hop and thus, show the accessibility and efficiency of contributing to the discussion at large using poetry as a medium. I have chosen four poems that display each of the dilemmas respectively. My analysis shows how the poems discuss each dilemma and what their place is in the context of contemporary hip-hop culture.

The first of these poems is one titled *Picking Flowers* by Nate Marshall. Marshall likens a rough neighborhood to a garden filled with flowers.

Grandma's rosebush  
reminiscent of a Vicelord's du-rag.  
the unfamiliar bloom in Mrs. Bradley's yard  
banging a Gangster Disciple style blue.  
the dandelions all over the park putting on  
Latin King gold like the Chicano cats  
over east before they turn into a puff  
of smoke like all us colored boys

picking dandelions will ruin your hands,  
turn their smell into a bitter cologne.

*he is in love*  
*he is in mourning*  
*he is a flower salesman*

i'm on the express train passing stops  
to a woman. maybe she's home.  
i have a bouquet in my hand,  
laid on 1 of my arms like a shotgun.  
the color is brilliant, a gang war  
wrapped & cut diagonal at the stems.  
i am not a flower salesman.  
that is the only thing i know.

Nate Marshall presents an artistic vision of the infamous gangs of Southside Chicago with the analogy of flowers. The poem seems to describe the outer appeal and familiarity that the gangs provide to those who are at risk and how it destroys innocence. The speaker of the poem ends with a statement of not knowing whether they are mourning or in love, but they are certain they are not a salesman. The poem

displays a feeling of uncertainty through the observations of the speaker. The first line shows a powerful image of an impoverished neighborhood with a lot to unpack.

“Grandma’s rosebush, reminiscent of a Vicelord’s du-rag”. Marshall’s opening line describes an unfortunate reality of the environment; that the violence and suffering of a neighborhood is unrestricted to the those who live in it. Your Grandma’s house and garden are not immune to wrath of gang violence. *Picking Flowers* conveys that an impoverished area continues to live even though there are daily threats and uncertainties that well-off communities do not deal with.

One of the biggest sources of uncertainty that is faced within urban communities stems from institutionalized racism that manifests itself through the abuse of power by authorities. The poem titled *Lesson One*, written by Nile and Onam Lansana, is one that covers the subject of police brutality and racial bias towards black people in the United States. The authors write the poem in the form of a letter written by a parent to their son, that sorrowfully expresses the worries that they have for the dangers they face.

(Excerpts)

Son,

i love you,  
that’s why I’m telling you this  
to protect you  
you’re a black boy  
i can only give you advice on this  
i’m sorry  
that I have to tell you about mirandas  
instead of reading you bedtime stories

\*\*\*\*

Son  
you're a black dot  
my black dot  
in this shooting gallery  
i have to keep you safe  
your hand is just as close to your wallet  
as theirs to their holsters

...

black men will always get lynched but they stop using ropes  
a long time ago

Oscar Grant  
1 shot  
innocent  
he was supposed to take his daughter to Chuck E Cheese  
he was riding the train home  
police pulled him and his boys off the train  
and put a hole in his back

...

arms  
handcuffs  
holster  
arms  
handcuffs  
holster

Son, promise me you'll never have to dance to that beat

The intent of this poem, on a literal level, is to deliver a warning and apology to the son of a black person. The speaker is explaining the hardships and challenges that their son will face as a black man. They lament on the fact that they have to explain the harsh realities that the son will face in order to protect him instead of letting them enjoy their childhood innocence. The poem attempts to deliver a message and emotion to the reader that typically African-American men experience; the understanding that they are a target of violence by police because of the way they look. The author references well

known incidents of unwarranted police violence towards black men in a frank and short manner. The speaker hopes that their son will never have to use the knowledge and warning of police tactics in practice.

*Lesson One* discusses racism from the perspective of a parent of a black child. It raises the question of why the world is in such a state that as a parent, one must warn their child of the dangers of interacting with the authorities that are supposed to be there to protect them. The conversation of police interaction is one that many black people in the United States experience with their parents. Because of the propensity for unfair, aggressive and biased treatment towards blacks and Latinos in the United States, it is important for young people of color to understand at a young age, what they can and should expect from an interaction with the police. Just like N.W.A.'s song *Fuck the Police*, this poem describes a feeling of anger and disdain for the authorities to unfairly target black and brown people based on the way they look.

The channeling of a feeling of disdain against unequal treatment is used in the *BreakBeat Poets* Anthology to discuss feminist issues. Misogyny is a dilemma that has plagued Hip-hop from its inception. The poem titled *Harbor*, written by Aleshea Harris serves as a public calling and rally cry against the patriarchal structure that exists in Hip-hop culture.

"You a pussy this pussy ass phone ain't workin tell alla dem bomba clat pussyhole fuh gwan!"

And pussies everywhere retreat.

The First Pussy will say under her breath that you are only as good as  
she is  
The Second will whisper that she has been trying her best since God

first pressed His want inside of her  
The Third merely cuts her eyes and mumbles something about  
how you can always hear a pussy pop on the track, back behind the  
building, in the bedroom, beneath the bravado wearing more grimace  
than a smile but never seein' any profits  
Hm.  
The Fourth thinks you ought to pray to Pussy  
Here's what you say to Pussy:  
"Hail Pussy, full of grace.  
Blessed art thou among body parts  
For the prophets cum through  
And come through you  
Forgive the forgetful foolish popes, poets, priests and MCs. Amen"

Pussy pushes up her sleeves  
She's always in a fight on the schoolyard  
They keep talkin' 'bout beatin' her up or beatin' her to sleep  
She keeps her composure  
But it's difficult when the classroom and Congress  
Are overrun with boys and girls who say they love  
But act like they despise Pussy  
Pussy chuckles at the absurdity  
She knows that if it were white folks bashing black folks in verse the way men bash  
women—I mean—pussy – in there songs  
No one would dance along and say, "O but they're not talkin' about  
Me." Or "I just like the beat"  
Pussy thinks that shit is weak  
She is tired of hip hop's "greatest" finding fame, Grammys and more  
Pussy at her expense.  
She got the blues, y'all.  
She is being stolen in a cul-de-sac in Cali  
She has had too much wine and blames herself  
She is sliding down a pole in the ATL wishing she didn't have to  
Explain herself  
She is bruised and oozing in the Congolese bush  
Where they dare Pussy with a dick, then a stick, then a gun blast  
She weeps through her stitches, holds herself together like a fist  
And wonders if they cut off her lips in Niger' cause she can talk to the  
Moon  
If they severed her clit 'cause her pleasure shakes the earth's core and  
Brings forth the greatest alchemy  
God stores his gold in Pussy  
So they keep legislating and probing like our bodies are the Wild West  
But Pussy ain't goin' nowhere,  
She gon' always be rockin her Sunday best on the porch swing or  
Taking the bus from Delhi to tomorrow



So don't be like no apple hatin' its tree  
You ain't got to have one to  
Stand up for Pussy  
Stand up for Pussy  
Stand up for Pussy  
Amen

Aleshea Harris's *Harbor* serves as a rally call for the plight of females across all cultures. The poem opens with a line in Jamaican patois that uses the word "pussy", a term all too often used to describe women within hip-hop music, as word to exclaim anger and frustration. Harris provides the reaction of "pussies" to the emotions of the opening line. In the first half of the piece, she uses "Pussy" to describe women as a way of pointing out the problem of the word and its reductive properties. The reference of women as "Pussy" reduces a human being to a body part, which in hip-hop culture is all too often becomes the only perceived piece of value for a women. Harris, in a way, reclaims the word to give it meaning beyond the misogynistic use within hip-hop culture. She uses the reference of women as Pussy as a way to talk about the issues women face as opposed their sexual value. Harris raises the absurdity and contradictive state of hip-hop music when it comes to the denigration of women. She points out that while hip-hop culture is highly aware and conscious of racial issues in the country, it still has a history of casually "bashing" women. The poses that if white people insulted and degraded black people in the way men do towards women in hip-hop culture, no one would be accepting towards it and make exception because they "they're not talking about me" or "they just like the beat". *Harbor* helps to expose the trivialization of misogyny and violence towards women that hip-hop culture has supported and ignored for the large part of its existence. The poem raises that many of hip-hop's "greatest" artists have won acclaim and success at the expense of "pussy". The big question is;

why a genre of music and art that was founded on protest and the desire for social justice for minority communities simultaneously oppresses and entire gender?

The poem further connects the suffering of women on wider scale in the latter half. Harris touches on sexual assault with the line “She is being stolen in a cul-de-sac in Cali”. She touches on sexual freedom with the line “She is sliding down a pole in the ATL wishing she didn’t have to explain herself”. The author finishes with the discussion of genital mutilation and rape in Africa. *Harbor* ends with a rally for women and men to stand up for change. Harris reclaims the word as a positive with the phrase “Stand up for Pussy”.

Harris’s intent is to get the audience to question their complacency towards highly visible misogyny within hip-hop. It is important for people within hip-hop culture to be self reflexive in order to keep the culture progressive. Hip-hop has sparked much change throughout the United States but still suffers from internal contradictions and dilemmas that need to be addressed in the way that Harris does with *Harbor*.

One of the internal contradictions that Hip-hop suffers from is the trend of rabid homophobia that is displayed in the culture. Hip-hop was born out of the oppression of minorities in the United States but, it is important to recognize the hand it has played in the continuing oppression of queer people within he culture. Douglas Kearney addresses this social dilemma in his unconventionally written poem titled *No Homo*.

Douglas Kearney's *No Homo*, provides an expressive look at the reaction and fear of queer people that is present within a community. The phrase "No Homo" is one

that is popular within urban communities to express a reaffirmation of heterosexuality, especially with males. Personally, I can regretfully remember using this phrase myself as a young teenager. It was a phrase that didn't arise any second thought within my community at the time. Kearney points out the problems of the phrase and the implications it brings for Hip-hop, which is heavily linked to urban and minority communities. "No Homo" implies that men must check themselves and remind their peers that they are indeed a heteronormative, masculine male. It also assumes that being "Homo" is a negative aspect of a person and rejects the prospect of someone not fitting within the traditional gender binary. Kearney's poem attempts to display the absurdity of "No Homo" through seemingly random placed stanzas that portray the manic thoughts of contradictions surrounding the phrase.

Physically, Kearney seems to place the large, dense layer of "No Homo" above everything else on the page in the shape of an umbrella as a way to show how everything below is what is left when you unpack the phrase "No Homo". The manic burst of writing beneath the layer of "No Homo" show the thoughts of someone wrestling with the fear of being labeled as queer. "A torso belle lettres that he don't wanna be (mis) read. like a girl toe, pinky swear, hot boy! *No homo* a pair of crossed fingers baby! Don't let you be mis- understood!" (Kearney, 125) The reader of the poem uses the phrase "belle lettres", a genre of fine writing, as a metaphor for their own suspected femininity. The reader is afraid of being outed as anything other than a heteronormative male or being "mis-read". The fear of being exposed is indictive of the homophobia within urban communities. The environment that queer people have to navigate creates an encouragement to stay hidden as a someone who does not exist within the binary.

The poem repeats the phrase “drop em” in an overlapping manner before questioning why people have to be ashamed and on the “low-down.” “Drop em” is used as a suppressive phrase to ignore or leave behind any one that is suspected of being queer. The section floats like a cloud obscuring rational thought and reason. Kearney is asking the audience of the poem to peel back the layers of fear and contradiction behind the phrase “No Homo.”

The poem ends with the question “why we got to be ashamed?” with the word “low-down” inserted next to “ashamed”. There is a lot of power in this last sentence. It indicates the state that queer people live in urban and hip-hop culture. In many communities, including my own when I was young, queer people were expected to keep their queerness quiet and hidden. Non-binary people were suppressed in order to strengthen black masculinity. Penney references this in his article “The panic surrounding hip hop’s recent queering of black masculine identity can be read as the latest iteration of a long and unfortunate history of homophobia within African-American popular culture. The denigration of the queer Other in order to strengthen an unstable heterosexual masculine identity has a very particular history and meaning within the African-American community;” (Penney, 330) Kearney’s poem *No Homo* is an excellent example of the amount of depth and discussion that can be reached with poetry as tool to critique the important dilemmas of hip-hop culture. Douglas Kearney is able to demonstrate the potential that poetry has to provide a space to discuss issues in hip-hop culture from a different angle. The medium of poetry allows artists to express the experiences they have in a way that is unique from hip-hop music alone. The visual aspect that is

required of poetry allows different and nuanced expression of the experiences surrounding the social dilemmas of Hip-hop.

The discussions of social issues in Hip-hop have had a noticeable change on the culture. An example of such change can be seen in the evolution of the hip-hop collective known as “Odd Future”. The group was notorious for its’ edgy lyrics, abrasive language and above all, homophobic tendencies. The leader of the collective, Tyler The Creator, used the “word faggot” excessively. Although the now dissolved collective was quite successful and launched the careers of several hip-hop artists, they received a large dose of criticism for their homophobic lyrics.

In 2011, Billboard reported that the collective was dropped from a major music festival in New Zealand after the organizers received heavy pressure from local LGBT activists about the group performing. “The Auckland City Council, which owns the Big Day Out venue Mt Smart Stadium, forced promoters to remove Odd Future from the traveling festival’s Auckland date after local activist Calum Bennachie took complaints to the Council” (Cubarrubia). After the collective eventually dissolved over the next few years, several members have made very drastic changes in their lyrical content and public actions. With the release of his latest album titled *Flower Boy*, Tyler the Creator has garnered attention for revealing his questioning of his sexuality as well as promoting his listeners to accept themselves for who they are. Another former member of the Odd Future collective, Frank Ocean, made headlines across the hip-hop community in 2012, when he revealed a relationship he had with a man in his teenage years on Tumblr. Ocean’s music challenges the hyper-masculine ideal that is present in Hip-hop. In an article titled *Frank Ocean: Challenging Hip-hop’s Hyper-masculinity*, Ocean’s rebellion

against the heteronormative standard is detailed. "Ocean acts both symbolically, as being a black queer man in hip-hop culture, and substantively, by weaving his experience as a black queer man into his music." (Layton). While Frank Ocean never personally said or displayed homophobic lyrics in his music, his association with the Odd Future collective at the time was questionable considering his experience as a queer person. As Ocean has become more successful in his career, his stories that are woven into his music, such as the song *Bad Religion*, shows a push for a more inclusive Hip-hop scene.

Seeing the former members of a collective that was heavily criticized for insensitive lyrics currently making music that pushes against the hyper-masculine aspect of Hip-hop displays the work that discussing social dilemmas can help achieve. Having the space to discuss homophobic tendencies in Hip-hop helps support artists like Frank Ocean, who have helped open the door for other queer hip-hop artists. Poetry serves as a tool to assist in pushing hip-hop culture towards the future in a progressive way. Douglas Kearney's *No Homo*, much like Frank Ocean, is working to break down the barriers that exist in Hip-hop as a subculture that exist because of Homophobia. This is just one of many poems in the *BreakBeat Poets* anthology that help in pushing the culture forward by creating a space that supports inclusivity in Hip-hop.

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